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Jonathan Leader Maynard

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Introduction

1.1 The Puzzle of Mass Killing

Since the start of the twentieth century, between eighty million and two hundred million people have died in *mass killings:* large-scale coordinated campaigns of lethal violence which systematically target civilians.[1] These mass killings have taken many forms: from genocides to major terrorist campaigns and from aerial bombardments to massacres by paramilitary organizations. They have occurred on every continent bar Antarctica: from the Holocaust in Europe to Mao's Cultural Revolution in China, and from mass violence against the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australasia to the Rwandan Genocide in central Africa. Such organised killing of civilians represents one of the deadliest categories of political violence, its victims heavily outnumbering the thirty-four million soldiers who died in twentieth century battlefield warfare.[2] While there has been some recent decline in mass killings, they continue to recur.[3] In 2003, the Darfur region of Sudan was subjected to the twenty-first century's first major genocide, with 300,000 killed, while mass killings have also scarred Iraq, Syria, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and numerous other states over the last two decades.[4] These campaigns involve the most absolute violations of victims' human rights, and constitute the severest 'atrocity crimes' in international law.[5]

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[1] Anderton and Brauer 2016, 4. The variation in estimates reflects data problems and controversies over how to classify such violence – higher estimates are open to criticism, see Gerlach 2010, 256-8 & 468 fn.6.

[2] Valentino 2004, 1

[3] Bellamy 2012, 4-9. Overall, states have targeted civilians in one fifth to one third of all wars, see: Downes and McNabb Cochran 2010, 23.

[4] Butcher et al. 2020

[5] See: Scheffer 2006; United Nations 2014; Sharma and Welsh 2015; Dieng and Welsh 2016; Gordon 2017. I will therefore often refer to mass killings as atrocities, but not all atrocities are mass killings.

Why do mass killings occur? How do human beings come to *initiate*, *participate in,* and *support* such atrocities against unarmed men, women and children? In popular commentary, films, and media coverage, three rough-and-ready answers to these questions are common. First, the perpetrators are often presented as either individually insane – as psychopaths and sadists – or as whipped up into a kind of social madness of collective rage and hatred.[6] Second, mass killings are sometimes thought to expose humanity's innately aggressive and destructive nature. When the restraints of law and order are peeled away, it is suggested, this innate propensity towards violence is unleashed.[7] Finally, it is sometimes suggested that perpetrators of mass killing are simply acting under coercion.[8] As members of totalitarian societies or harsh military or paramilitary organizations, they kill because they themselves have the threat of death hanging over them should they disobey.

These explanations might seem superficially plausible, but five decades of scholarship on mass killings has shown all three to be inaccurate. Mental illness or mindless rage amongst perpetrators of organised violence is rare. In fact, as the psychologist James Waller puts it: "it is ordinary people, like you and me, who commit genocide and mass killing."[9] Although disturbing, this should not really be surprizing. Mass killing generally requires the support or acquiescence of substantial sections of societies over periods of months or years.[10] It is unlikely that this number of people could be psychologically abnormal in any meaningful sense, or successfully participate in sustained coordinated violence while consumed by blind rage. Indeed, the organizations that recruit perpetrators of mass killing, such as secret police departments, state militaries, or insurgent groups, sometimes go to great lengths to *weed out* psychopaths, sadists and uncontrollably hate-fuelled individuals from their ranks.[11]

Modern research also refutes claims that human beings are innately predisposed to violence.[12] If anything, as psychologists Rebecca Littman and Elizabeth Levy Paluck summarise, "military history and scientific evidence show that most people *avoid* physically harming others, even at personal cost."[13] Even in war, when there are overwhelming reasons to kill in order to stay alive, soldiers often struggle to do so. This is not a matter of

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[6] See: Aronson 1984; Kressel 2002; Wilshire 2006; Orange 2011; Bradshaw 2014; www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34840699. For further examples and critique, see: Kalyvas 2006, 32-4; Valentino 2014, 92.

[7] E.g. Ghiglieri 1999.

[8] Most commonly, perpetrators themselves make such claims – see, for example: Anderson 2017, 51-2 & 56-7; Jessee 2017, 168-73. For scholarly accounts which emphasize coercive state power, see: Brzezinski 1956; Rummel 1994; Rummel 1995, 4-5.

[9] Waller 2007, 20. See also: Staub 1989, 67; Browning 1992/2001; Smeulers 2008, 234; Alvarez 2008, 217-18; McDoom 2013, 455-6; Littman and Paluck 2015. Atrocities may still be 'evil', see: Card 2002; Vetlesen 2005; Russell 2014.

[10] How much support is needed is, however, debateable, see: Mueller 2000; Valentino 2004, 2-3; Kalyvas 2006, 102-3.

[11] Schirmer 1998, 165; Valentino 2004, 42-44 & 57-8; Waller 2007, 71; Dutton 2007, 136; Baum 2008, 77.

[12] For summaries, see: Collins 2008; Grossman 2009.

[13] Littman and Paluck 2015, 84

cowardice: such soldiers often run immense personal risks, even throwing themselves on grenades, to aid comrades.[14] But they struggle to fire their weapons at the enemy, and often suffer serious trauma for doing so. If mass killings were really produced by innate human destructiveness, moreover, they should occur in almost all instances of war and social breakdown. Yet, while mass killings are tragically recurrent across world history, most periods of war and upheaval pass by without them.[15] Rather than an uncontrolled consequence of human nature, then, mass killings are what the historian Christopher Browning terms "atrocity by policy": organised collective campaigns deliberately implemented by *certain* people, at *certain* times.[16]

The third popular explanation, that killers are simply coerced, is not quite so misguided. Organisers of mass killing do deploy forceful coercion to suppress opposition, and sometimes to compel people to participate in violence. Nevertheless, in research on over a hundred years of modern mass killings, only a small minority of perpetrators seem to have reluctantly obeyed orders to kill issued on pain of death.[17] Even the most powerful totalitarian regimes in history have generally been unable to micromanage violence through coercion alone, relying instead on considerable support and willing compliance from their subordinates and broader populations.[18] Where perpetrators are coerced, moreover, this remains only a partial explanation, because campaigns of mass killing are not coercive 'all the way up'. Someone (and usually not just one person) has to decide that violence is the right course to take, and many others have to decide to support them. Coercion does not explain such decisions.

The inadequacy of these rough-and-ready explanations generates the central puzzle of mass killing. Mass killings are widely thought to be morally abhorrent, and typically involve acts (such as the killing of children) that run against established cultural norms across the world. The violence is typically psychologically arduous, at least initially, for those who carry it out. Perhaps most puzzlingly of all, mass killings often seem irrational for the very regimes and groups that perpetrate them. In the Soviet Union in the 1930s, Joseph Stalin's Great Terror included a large-scale purge of the Red Army which left it desperately weakened in the face of Nazi invasion four years later. In 1970s Guatemala, the military regime responded to a left-wing guerrilla insurgency with brutal massacres of the country's indigenous Maya communities, prompting many Maya to join the guerrillas and thereby strengthening the insurgency. Sometimes mass killings prove disastrous for perpetrators by antagonizing other states and encouraging outside intervention, as in Khmer Rouge Cambodia in 1979, or in recent ISIS atrocities in Iraq and Syria. Even when not clearly self-defeating, mass killings are risky courses of action, almost always wildly

[14] Grossman 2009, 4
[15] Straus 2012; Straus 2015, ch.2
[16] Browning 1992/2001, 161
[17] Ibid. 170; Valentino 2004, 48; Szejnmann 2008, 31; Goldhagen 2010, 148-50
[18] Overy 2004, chs. 5 & 8

disproportionate to any actual challenges their perpetrators face, and target individuals who present no obvious threat. So why do they occur? Why do certain political leaders initiate these policies of extreme violence? Why do their subordinates willingly implement them? Why do broader sectors of society support or acquiesce to the violence? These are the questions I seek to address in this book.

1.2 Ideology and Its Critics

I argue that effective answers to such questions must analyse the role of ideologies – broadly defined as the *distinctive political worldviews of individuals, groups, and organizations, that provide sets of interpretive and evaluative ideas for guiding political thought and action*. Ideologies are not the only key cause of mass killing. Indeed, scholars have identified many others, including circumstances of war, political instability and crisis;[19] discriminatory processes of nation-building;[20] psychological tendencies to follow authorities, conform to peer-pressure, or denigrate minorities;[21] and various self-interested motives for violence.[22] All of these factors matter. But they matter in interaction with ideology, because ideologies play a central role in determining both how people privately think about mass killings and how such violence can be publicly legitimated and organised. In cases such as those mentioned above, mass killings may look, from an outside perspective, like strategic and moral catastrophes. But they *appeared to perpetrators* as strategically advantageous and morally defensible. That impression was not a 'natural' consequence of the circumstances in which perpetrators found themselves, but it was a likely consequence given their prevailing ideological frameworks. Ideologies are therefore crucial in explaining two key things: first, whether mass killings occur in the first place, and second, the character of mass killings when they do occur – i.e. who they target, what logic of violence was employed, and how the killing unfolded within different areas and organizations.

This argument divides expert opinion. Indeed, the role of ideology is one of the most disputed issues in current scholarship on mass killing. That dispute rests, I will suggest, on rather murky theoretical foundations. But most existing research can be roughly characterised as adopting one of two perspectives.

In what I will call *traditional-ideological perspectives*, ideologies are seen as a crucial driver of mass killings, because they provide the extremist goals and mentalities that motivate

[19] Kalyvas 1999; Harff 2003; Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004; Valentino 2004; Downes 2008; Fjelde and Hultman 2014; Maat 2020
[20] Mann 2005; Levene 2008; Segal 2018
[21] Milgram 1974/2010; Kelman and Hamilton 1989; Bandura 1999; Waller 2007; Zimbardo 2007; Neilsen 2015; Williams 2021
[22] Aly 2008; Gerlach 2010; Esteban, Morelli, and Rohner 2015; Williams 2021

ideologically committed individuals to perpetrate the violence.[23] Emphasis is most commonly placed on revolutionary ideological goals to remake society, ideological hatreds towards certain victim groups, and the ideological reversal of traditional moral norms. In early post-Holocaust scholarship (including famous critiques by the likes of Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt), such dangers were centrally associated with totalitarian ideologies such as Nazism, Stalinism and Maoism, which guided arguably the three most destructive regimes in human history.[24] More recent work has broadened the focus beyond totalitarianism, but still emphasizes *extraordinary* 'utopian' or 'revolutionary' ideological projects that upend conventional morality and abandon pragmatic political considerations. Such claims take their most emphatic form in Daniel Goldhagen's contention that mass support for "eliminationist anti-Semitism" amongst ordinary Germans provided the necessary and sufficient motivational cause for the Holocaust.[25] But many other scholars, while not going as far as Goldhagen, also focus on the role of unconventional ideological goals, mindsets and hatreds that motivate ideologically committed perpetrators of mass killing.[26]

In opposition to such arguments, many scholars adopt what I term a *sceptical perspective* on ideology's role in mass killing. Without necessarily declaring it completely irrelevant, such sceptics downplay ideology's significance and largely exclude it from their explanations of such violence. Two main arguments have been offered here. First, sceptics contend that few perpetrators actually seem motivated by deep ideological commitments in the way traditional-ideological perspectives suggest. Secondly, sceptics suggest that even if radical ideologies do influence perpetrators, such ideologies are themselves largely a symptom of more fundamental social or political causes, such as societal upheaval, authoritarian governing institutions, or war. On either argument, 'non-ideological' motives or forces appear to be the key drivers of mass killing, and ideology is largely reduced to a pretext or 'post-hoc rationalization' for violence.

Such ideology-sceptics therefore offer alternative 'non-ideological' explanations of mass killing.[27] The most influential of these, on which I focus most attention in this book, come from *rationalist* theories. Rationalists argue that mass killings occur because they can

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[23] I include perspectives primarily orientated around concepts distinct from but closely related to ideology (such as culture, identity, hate propaganda, and so forth) that explain mass killing in essentially the same fashion.

[24] See: Popper 1945/2003; Arendt 1951/1976; Berlin 1954/2002; Brzezinski 1956; Popper 1963/2002, ch.18; Arendt 1963/2006; Linz 1975/2000, ch.2; Kirkpatrick 1979; Kuper 1981, ch.5; Shorten 2012; Berlin 2013; Richter, Markus, and Tait 2018.

[25] Goldhagen 1996. For similar perspectives applied to mass killings more broadly, see: Kressel 2002; Goldhagen 2010.

[26] See, for example: Melson 1992; Weiss 1997; Weitz 2003; Kiernan 2003; Hagan and Rymond-Richmond 2008; Midlarsky 2011.

[27] These sceptical accounts are compatible, since they typically address different 'levels of analysis' – with rationalists often focusing on why political decision-makers *initiate* policies of mass killings, while situationists focus on why followers *participate in* such policies.

be a useful, albeit brutal, strategy for achieving important goals common to all regimes and groups, whatever their idiosyncratic ideologies – such as holding onto power, winning wars, or gaining material wealth. Not all rationalists side-line ideology and some (correctly, I will argue) see rationality and ideology as importantly intertwined.[28] But most rationalists suggest that mass killings do not depend on any particular kind of ideological worldview.[29] Instead, they are explained by particular *strategic circumstances*, such as certain kinds of political crisis or armed conflict, which create incentives for governments or groups to target civilian populations with violence.

An alternative source of ideology-scepticism comes from what I term *situationist* theories.[30] For situationists, mass killing is best explained by various kinds of *situational social pressure* on individuals, such as bureaucratic routines, orders from authorities, peer-pressure, or group emotions. Again, not all situationists deny that ideology plays an important role.[31] But for sceptical situationists, these social pressures are so powerful that they can induce violence amongst different individuals and groups irrespective of their ideologies. Like rationalists, situationists tend to emphasize how certain contexts of crisis and war create or intensify such situational pressures for violence. They often also stress the way such pressures encourage the relatively unplanned escalation of violent policies or practices within bureaucracies and local communities.

In this book, I challenge both the traditional-ideological perspective and the ideology-sceptics. Against the sceptics, I argue that ideology is essential in explaining mass killings. I do not reject rationalist or situationist theories *per se*. They are quite correct to emphasize the role of strategic circumstances and situational social pressures. But whether such circumstances and pressures lead to mass killing or not *depends on ideology*. This is not just true of a subset of especially 'ideological' cases, moreover – *all* mass killings have an important ideological dimension. Yet, I simultaneously argue that traditional-ideological perspectives mischaracterize that dimension: wrongly rooting mass killings in 'extraordinary' ideological goals and values. This book therefore advances a different account of ideology's role in mass killings – one which stresses the interdependence of ideology, strategic circumstances, and situational pressures. I term this a *neo-ideological perspective.*

A Neo-Ideological Perspective

This neo-ideological perspective revises the more traditional portrayal of how ideology might feed into mass killing in two key ways.

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[28] See, for example: Valentino 2004; Maat 2020.
[29] E.g. Downes 2008, 11.
[30] See also Fujii 2009.
[31] See, for example: Zimbardo 2007.

First, I argue that the crucial ideological foundations for mass killing are not utopian ambitions, revolutionary values or extraordinary hatreds that *contrast with* conventional strategic and moral concerns. Instead, the primary ideological foundations of mass killing *exploit conventional strategic and moral ideas* – specifically ideas associated with security, war, and political order. It is not the abandonment of strategic pragmatism and traditional morality in favour of extraordinary ideological goals that matters, in other words, but the radical reinterpretation of such conventional ideas within extreme ideological narratives of threat, criminal conspiracy, patriotic valour and military necessity. These *justificatory narratives* for mass killing, as I shall call them, are thus largely security-orientated and yet vitally ideological – embedded in broader political worldviews and making little sense if stripped from their particular ideological context. Such narratives are critical, both in guiding the formulation of policies of mass killing by political elites, and in mobilizing, legitimating and organizing the violence amongst broader sections of society.

Mass killing is not best understood, therefore, as a revolutionary project to transform society (as many traditional-ideological approaches suggest), an instrumental strategy largely dictated by circumstantial incentives (as rationalist-sceptics portray it), or an escalatory campaign primarily driven by social pressure (as situationist-sceptics often imply). There is truth in each of these portrayals, but none accurately characterizes ideology's role in mass killing. Instead, mass killing is best understood as a form of *ideologically radicalised security politics*. It is rooted in the ideological and institutional architecture of war-waging, policing and national security found in all complex human societies. It is driven by the familiar strategic and moral concerns of such activities: the perception of threats and criminality and an assessment of violence as a necessary way of defending the political order against them. It is typically carried out by state security apparatuses (or their non-state analogues) with all the organizational norms, capacities and tendencies typical of such institutions. But in mass killings, all these familiar features of security politics have become radicalised by extreme 'hardline' ideological worldviews, which make *civilians* appear justified targets of *mass* violence.

I therefore characterize the central agents of mass killing – both among political leaders and in wider society – as security hardliners, promoting massive violence against civilian populations to advance the safety and interests of the society, regime or group they identify with. But I argue that it is imperative to *understand such hardliners as an ideological category*. Hardliners are not merely responding rationally to the objective situations they find themselves in, nor are they 'unthinkingly' following orders or bureaucratic procedures. They are guided by distinctive sets of ideas about security and politics which ideologically distinguish them from less hardline groups. This reflects the fact, ignored by too many scholars, that the politics of war and national security are just as 'ideological' as any other branch of politics, with different factions of society guided by different sets of ideas about

security and how to achieve it.[32] I identify six clusters of hardline ideas as most crucial here: i) the portrayal of civilian targets of violence as *threats*; ii) the assertion that such civilian targets are *guilty of serious crimes*; iii) the *denial of common links of identity* between civilian targets and the primary political community; iv) the *valorization of violence* against civilians as dutiful, tough and soldierly; v) the assertion that such violence will generate tremendous *future strategic benefits*, and vi) the *destruction of meaningful alternatives* to mass killing, so that it is portrayed as essentially unavoidable. When strongly hardline factions guided by such ideas are able to achieve political dominance, mass killing becomes a serious possibility in times of crisis. But when dominant political factions have little sympathy for hardline ideas, they will almost always opt for less extreme (though not necessarily benign) courses of action.

This book therefore challenges a dominant assumption of existing scholarship on political violence: namely, that a fundamental contrast separates 'ideological' motives for violence (associated with the pursuit of ultimate political ideals) from more 'strategic' or 'pragmatic' concerns (associated with the pursuit of security, power or military victory).[33] Though common, this assumption is a profound conceptual handicap that distorts prevailing understandings of mass killing and political violence more generally. In reality, few if any real-world ideologies simply ignore strategic concerns in favour of dogmatic implementation of their ultimate ideals. Nor is the pursuit of power and security ever governed by a self-evident pragmatism free from the influence of ideology.[34] Instead, ideologies critically influence decision-makers' strategic thinking – shaping their perceptions of threats, their assessments of the appropriate and effective policies for neutralizing those threats, and their assumptions about the moral basis for and limits to those policies.[35]

I therefore agree with the rationalist claim that mass killing is a *strategic* form of violence.[36] It is, as Ben Valentino puts it, "an instrumental policy…designed to accomplish leaders' most important ideological or political objectives and counter what they see as

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[32] This point has been emphasised by constructivist, critical and feminist security scholars, see: Katzenstein 1996; Owen 1997; Campbell 1998; Smith 2004; Haas 2005; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Haas 2012.

[33] For similar critiques of this dichotomy, see: Straus 2012, 549; Verdeja 2012, 315-16; Staniland 2015, 771-2; Straus 2015, 11-12. So entrenched is the dichotomy that some scholars write as though the mere fact that mass killing is instrumental suggests that ideology's role must be minimal – as if ideology *requires* a kind of 'killing for killings' sake campaign, see: Roemer 1985; du Preez 1994, 69-70; Mitchell 2004, 38 & 41. But this is a caricature. Even exterminatory mass killings rooted in the most egregious ideological fantasies – such as the Nazi belief in a Jewish world conspiracy – are still committed in pursuit of *ends,* such as the protection of the state and the community against (imagined) enemies.

[34] Jabri 1996; Campbell 1998.

[35] Straus 2012; Straus 2015

[36] I.e., it is a means for achieving certain goals, chosen because it is deemed a consequentially (and perhaps also deontologically) superior means for doing so compared to perceived alternatives in the relevant material and social environment. I do not assume that strategic violence must be driven purely by cost-benefit calculations or serve the objective interests of unitary actors – such claims should be understood as possibly-true explanatory arguments, to be assessed against alternatives, not a 'default' image written into the very notion of strategic choice. See also: Sjoberg 2013, 187-91.

their most dangerous threats."[37] Mass killings are not "wanton and senseless," but deliberate policies engaged in by certain individuals and groups and guided by comprehensible logics of violence.[38] Yet it is rarely plausible to portray mass killings as simply the most ruthlessly efficient way for perpetrators to achieve purportedly 'non-ideological' goals – as though anyone in their position would have favoured such an extreme course. What is crucial is the way mass killings can come to *appear* strategically rational (as well normatively legitimate), within a certain set of hardline ideological assumptions, narratives and institutions.

Take, for example, the Ottoman Empire's genocidal attacks on its Armenian population in 1915-17. These were motivated, in part, by Ottoman fears that Armenian nationalist groups might side with neighbouring Russia, the Ottomans' enemy, in World War I. Given such fears, genocide might appear like a rationally comprehensible strategy for a ruthless Ottoman state to eliminate a threat to its security. Yet the vast bulk of the Armenian population engaged in no such collaboration with Russia. Various less extreme options existed through which Ottoman leaders could have secured themselves against any anticipated Armenian rebellion.[39] Other European empires, with similar concerns about their ethnic minorities, did not employ such policies of annihilation.[40] So what mattered was not simply the strategic circumstances of war and crisis that the Ottoman Empire confronted. Pursuing genocide as a response to such circumstances only made sense in light of certain ideological narratives about the Armenian population and Ottoman security, which were adhered to by key political elites, institutionalised within the organizations they commanded, and promoted the broader social mobilization and escalation of violence.[41] Understanding this interdependence of ideology and security politics in contexts of crisis is, I argue, essential for effective explanation of all mass killings.

The second way this book revises traditional portrayals of ideology's role in mass killing is by retheorizing the basic psychological and social processes that link ideologies to violent action. Such processes rarely receive explicit dissection in research on mass killing or, indeed, political violence more broadly. But scholars often work with a tacit picture of ideology that I will refer to as the 'true believer model'. The true believer model depicts ideologies as rigid belief-systems which primarily shape political behaviour through strong ideological commitments to a certain 'ideal vision of society.' Consequently, the question of ideology's importance in mass killing is principally about the intensity of ideological

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[37] Valentino 2004, 3. This in no way denies that violence *also* has self-perpetuating qualities – contra Wolfgang Sofsky, who leaps from the correct claim that violence often exceeds its instrumental intentions to the erroneous conclusion that instrumental motives therefore play no causal role, see: Sofsky 2002, 18-19. On self-perpetuation, see: Arendt 1970; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Littman and Paluck 2015; Eastwood 2018.

[38] See: Kalyvas 1999; Straus 2012.

[39] Bloxham 2005, 86

[40] Bulutgil 2017

[41] Bloxham 2005

belief in such visions among perpetrators.[42] Both traditional-ideological and sceptical scholars of mass killing tend to implicitly adopt this model of ideology: with traditional-ideological theorists emphasizing perpetrators' strong ideological beliefs, while sceptics contend that ideology is unimportant *precisely because* they find few 'true believers' amongst the perpetrators they study.

By contrast, I argue that this focus on true believers is a mistake, for two reasons. First, even sincerely held ideas do not need to be endorsed with particularly deep conviction in order to shape political behaviour. 'True believers' do play a role in mass killing, especially amongst political elites, but most perpetrators lie between the extremes of intense ideological devotion on the one hand and complete ideological disinterest on the other. They are frequently conflicted and participate in mass killing in part for non-ideological motives. They have often only come to accept justifications of extreme violence relatively recently, and as tacitly endorsed notions or taken-for-granted assumptions rather than substantive, self-conscious 'beliefs.' But this does not make such perpetrators 'unideological'. Most still internalize key hardline justifications of mass killing – even if rather selectively or half-heartedly – which can be *vital* in explaining their participation in violence.

But this is still only half the story. Some people may not internalize ideological justifications of mass killing to *any* serious extent. Yet they often find themselves perpetrating or supporting the violence, and espousing the ideologies that justify it, nevertheless. It is typical to think that this proves that ideologies don't really matter. If killers don't really endorse an ideology, but kill anyway, it is easy to conclude that other factors or motives must have been the 'true' cause of violence. This is a fundamental error. We need to examine ideologies precisely because they can exert powerful influence *even over those who do not believe in them*. When an ideology becomes embedded in the institutions, norms and discourses of a group, organization or society, even non-believers are subject to considerable social or 'structural' pressure to comply with that ideology. Such individuals might consciously disbelieve in the ideology, or they might hold more ambivalent and/or ambiguous views, but they act *as if* they believe.[43] Social pressure may be the immediate driver of action, but the *direction* of that pressure – the specific behaviour it encourages – cannot be explained if the ideology in question is removed from the picture.

By unpacking these two central ways – *internalised* and *structural* – in which ideologies may matter, I seek to move the locus of debates over ideology away from disputes over the number of true believers. Ideologies are crucial, not because they provide a single 'ideological motive' for violence found only amongst their most devoted followers, but because they bind diverse coalitions of perpetrators into collective violence through

[42] An alternative tendency is essentially the opposite – to treat ideologies as purely instrumental tools largely unrelated to actual belief. I address this in Chapter 2.
[43] See also: Wedeen 2019, 4-8.

multiple causal mechanisms.[44] Ideologies are deeply believed in by some, but more shallowly internalised, complied with under pressure, or cynically manipulated by others. They typically operate alongside, and sometimes through, careerist, conformist and self-interested concerns. For some perpetrators, ideological justifications for mass killing may directly *motivate* violence – whether by internalised personal convictions that draw individuals into violence, or by generating structural pressure within ideological groups, organizations and institutions that induce individuals to perpetrate. For other perpetrators, ideological justifications may primarily *legitimate* violence – whether by allowing individuals to sincerely see their own participation in violence as legitimate, or by creating a structural context in which violence is publicly legitimizable.[45] For some, ideological justifications may even amount to little more than a kind of 'negative legitimation' – sowing confusion about the violence and producing an "atmosphere of epistemic and affective murk," as Lisa Wedeen puts it, that obstructs effective opposition.[46] But in *all* these circumstances, the specific ideas that make up an ideology can crucially shape whether and how mass killings occur.

So mass killings do not require mass ideological enthusiasm. But they do depend, as I shall put it, on a kind of *ideological infrastructure:* a mutually reinforcing mix of both sincerely accepted hardline ideas *and* hardline norms and institutions that, together, sustain and guide extreme collective violence. Compared to the association of ideology with true believers, this multifaceted characterization of ideology's influence is more consistent with modern social, psychological and economic theories of the impact of ideas on human behaviour. It rejects several weary scholarly dichotomies: ideology is not associated solely with 'structure' *or* 'agency,' 'intentions' *or* 'functions,' 'micro' *or* 'macro', but is powerful precisely because it operates across such factors and levels of analysis. This also fits much better with leading empirical research on mass killings, which strongly emphasizes the diversity of perpetrators. I thus agree with several claims made by ideology-sceptics: that perpetrators of mass killing act from various motives and are not typically guided by longstanding devotion to a single monolithic ideology. But it is a mistake to think that these findings imply that ideology's role in violence is peripheral.

Advancing the Debate

This neo-ideological perspective is not wholly unprecedented. A few scholars – principally Alex Bellamy, Donald Bloxham, Zeynep Bulutgil, Omar McDoom, Elisabeth Hope Murray, Jacques Sémelin, Scott Straus and Ben Valentino – have argued that ideology matters in mass killings, but in ways that do not fully match the traditional-ideological

[44] For similar emphases of ideology's multifaceted role in violent coalitions, see: Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Anderson 2017, chs.4-5; Williams 2021.
[45] Skinner 1974, 292-300; Jost and Major 2001
[46] Wedeen 2019, 4

perspective.[47] In presenting mass killing as a form of ideologically radicalised security politics, my perspective also has strong affinities with Martin Shaw's conception of genocide as a form of "degenerate war,"[48] and with critical and feminist scholars' emphasis on the expansive justificatory potential of modern discourses of security and violence.[49] As noted, some rationalists and situationists also embrace ideology, and even the sceptics are often only really disputing the traditional-ideological portrayal of mass killing and may be receptive to the kind of neo-ideological perspective developed here.[50]

While indebted to these precedents, this book attempts to go further than existing studies in advancing the debate over ideology's role in mass killing. That role remains so disputed, I suggest, because there is huge uncertainty amongst scholars over the very nature of ideologies and their influence. Even amongst those who agree that ideology matters, *how* they think it matters varies considerably. Some scholars identify pernicious ideological themes, which vary from theorist to theorist. Thus, Eric Weitz focuses on "utopias of race and nation";[51] Ben Kiernan on "racism," "territorial expansionism," "cults of cultivation" and "purity";[52] Alex Alvarez on "nationalism," "past victimization," "dehumanization," "scapegoating," "absolutist worldview" and "utopianism";[53] Hugo Slim on a set of twelve "anti-civilian ideologies"[54] and Gerard Saucier and Laura Akers on twenty major elements of the "democidal thinking" behind mass killing.[55] Other scholars focus on specific linkages between certain ideologies and violence. Valentino emphasizes the way "radical communization" and "racist or nationalist beliefs" generate ideological goals which may be furthered by mass killing.[56] Straus suggests that ideological "founding narratives" of the political community are key – with exclusivist narratives portraying outgroups as pathological dangers in times of crisis.[57] Bulutgil contends that political parties ideologically orientated around ethnic cleavages, due to a lack of class-based or other 'cross-cutting' concerns, are most likely to engage in (ethnic) mass killings.[58] Though there are common ideas here, it is hard to know how these various accounts might be reconciled.

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[47] How these scholars theorize ideology's role varies considerably, however – see: Valentino 2004; Bloxham 2005; Semelin 2007; Bloxham 2008; Bellamy 2012; Straus 2015; Murray 2015; Bulutgil 2017; McDoom 2021. More sophisticated understandings of ideology can also be found in specialist literature on Nazism and Communism – see, for example: Schull 1992; Kershaw 1993; Kotkin 1995; Priestland 2007; Roseman 2007.
[48] Shaw 2003. See also: Moses 2021.
[49] Jabri 1996; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Sjoberg 2013
[50] See, for example: Newman and Erber 2002; Valentino 2004; Zimbardo 2007; Balcells 2017.
[51] Weitz 2003
[52] Kiernan 2003.
[53] Alvarez 2008, 220-7
[54] Slim 2007
[55] Saucier and Akers 2018
[56] Valentino 2004, 4-5
[57] Straus 2015
[58] Bulutgil 2016; Bulutgil 2017

Such uncertainty in scholarship is mirrored in political practice. The prevention of mass killing has become a central concern of international governmental and non-governmental organizations.[59] Yet ideology remains an area of perennial weakness in understanding. The United Nations' *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes*, for example, affirms the relevance of ideology under its fourth risk factor: "Motives or Incentives." Yet its comments are characteristically vague:

> "[I]t is extremely important to be able to identify motivations, aims or drivers that could influence certain individuals or groups to resort to massive violence as a way to achieve goals, feed an ideology or respond to real or perceived threats… [such as] those that are based on exclusionary ideology, which is revealed in the construction of identities in terms of "us" and "them" to accentuate differences. The historical, political, economic or even cultural environment in which such ideologies develop can also be relevant."[60]

This does not take us very far in assessing ideological risks of mass killing. 'Us' and 'them' differences are ubiquitous in global politics – how could we tell when they represent dangerous exclusionary ideologies?[61] Is this construction of us-them differences the only significant hallmark of such ideologies? How is the "political, economic, or even cultural environment" relevant, and how do we assess when it, in combination with ideology, truly promotes atrocities? This paragraph, from the only page of the *Framework* that mentions ideology, provides no way of even beginning to answer such questions.[62]

Ideological dynamics have also become important for legal practitioners, because efforts to address ideological propaganda, hate speech and extremism are increasingly central concerns of domestic and international law.[63] Yet legal analyses often rest on vaguely substantiated claims about how ideology and speech relate to violence. In the foremost study of "atrocity speech law," for example, Gregory S. Gordon affirms a "compelling connection between hate speech and mass atrocity" and contends that "[p]erpetrator conditioning through speech is a *sine qua non* for mass atrocity."[64] But Gordon generally supports such claims with purely descriptive observations of the *extent* of hate speech surrounding atrocities, not causal analysis of the *difference* such speech actually makes. Conversely, other legal scholars argue that speech has little to no impact on

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[59] See: Welsh 2010; Welsh 2016.
[60] United Nations 2014, 13
[61] Valentino 2004, 17-18
[62] Such problems also characterize the literature on counter-extremism and radicalisation. For discussion, see: Neumann 2013; Schuurman and Taylor 2018.
[63] Wilson 2017; Gordon 2017
[64] Gordon 2017, 6 & 24

political violence but base this conclusion on highly selective reference to relevant empirical research.[65] Similarly, as Susan Benesch and Richard Ashby Wilson observe, international tribunals have often made bold assertions that certain instances of ideological speech caused, or did not cause, violence but on the basis of minimal evidence and little apparent understanding of what role such speech might play.[66]

These problems, both in academic research and in political and legal practice, are rooted in a common cause: namely, that ideology's role in mass killing remains *under-theorised*. Scholars of mass killing often mention 'ideology,' but they rarely engage in detailed analysis of what ideologies actually are, nor systematically consider the range of ways in which ideological factors *could* encourage violence. They also tend to ignore specialist work on ideology from other fields, such as political psychology, political communications research, intellectual history, social movement studies and political theory.[67] Consequently, ideology's importance is often dismissed for very muddled reasons. Some suggest, for example, that because a single ideology (such as Nazism) is an overarching feature of a particular mass killing (such as the Holocaust), that ideology cannot explain the variation of violence over time, or in different areas, or against different victim groups.[68] This would only be true, however, if ideologies never changed over time, never varied in strength or form across different locations, and never contained different ideas about different categories of victim. Clearly this is not right. Other scholars downplay ideology simply because they find that other motives or considerations appear to have played a role – as though ideology must either exclusively and deterministically guide violence or else be deemed essentially irrelevant. When rendered explicit, such assumptions seem obviously mistaken, but they persist because of the lack of theoretical clarity over what ideologies are and how they operate.

This book is an attempt to tackle these problems. Rather than addressing ideology only as part of a general discussion of mass killings or only in one particular case, I make the role of ideology in mass killing the central focus of a comparative study. I seek to demonstrate that ideologies are indeed critical, but as dynamic sets of ideas about security politics, operating through multiple forms of influence, which interact with other important causes on the complex path of radicalization to mass killing. I make reference to a wide range of empirical research but develop detailed evidential support for my account by examining four quite different campaigns of mass killing: Stalinist repression in the Soviet Union, the Allied area bombing of Germany and Japan in World War II, mass atrocities in the Guatemalan civil war, and the Rwandan Genocide. Several other cases – such as the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and Cambodia under the Khmer

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[65] E.g. Danning 2019.
[66] Benesch 2012; Wilson 2016; Wilson 2017. See also: Straus 2007.
[67] There are partial exceptions to such neglect, see: Malešević 2006; Priestland 2007, 16-21; Alvarez 2008, 216-17; Malešević 2010; Cohrs 2012; Ryan 2012, 10-15.
[68] Hiebert 2008, 8; King 2012, 331; Maat 2020, 777-8.

Rouge – also figure repeatedly. These cases involve contrasting perpetrators, from different parts of the globe, influenced by various ideologies. If we find ideological patterns across such diverse contexts, there is a good chance that those patterns apply to mass killings more generally.

1.3 Elaborating the Argument

Conceptualizing 'Mass Killing' and 'Ideology'

Several parts of this book are relevant for thinking about ideology's role in political violence in general – there is also, after all, much dispute about its place in war, civil war, terrorism, and revolution. But I am focused on 'mass killings': *large-scale coordinated campaigns of lethal violence which systematically target civilians*.[69] Numerical criteria for 'large-scale' violence vary: Valentino suggests 50,000 civilian deaths over the space of five years,[70] Bellamy opts for 5,000 deaths in a particular campaign,[71] while Valentino and Jay Ulfelder's statistical analysis of mass killings and Charles Anderton's dataset of "mass atrocities" examine cases involving over 1,000 deaths a year.[72] The cases focused on in this book all meet Valentino's higher threshold, but where one draws the line is rather arbitrary.[73] Where relevant, I assume a simpler threshold of 10,000 civilian deaths a year. What matters is that mass killing involves deadly violence against civilians which is systematic and widespread rather than sporadic or uncoordinated.[74] I focus on modern (20th and 21st Century) mass killings, although much of the analysis could be extended, with some modification, to earlier cases. Unlike many studies, I do not restrict my focus solely to genocidal mass killings. Genocides have distinctive features which I discuss, vis a vis ideology, in Chapter 4. But studying them in isolation from other forms of violence against civilians often yields misleading

[69] In defining civilians, I use Valentino, Huth and Balch-Lindsay's description of "non-combatants" as "any unarmed person who is not a member of a professional or guerrilla military group and who does not actively participate in hostilities by intending to cause physical harm to enemy personnel or property," see: Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004, 378-9. Outside armed conflict, talking of 'civilians' or 'non-combatants' is something of a misapplication of International Humanitarian Law. But in lieu of any other obvious term, I follow other scholarship on mass killing in using 'civilians' to refer to unarmed, non-military populations even in peacetime contexts. My thanks to Jennifer Welsh for alerting me to this point. For similar conceptualisations of mass killing, see: Valentino 2004, 10-15; Owens, Su, and Snow 2013, 71-2.

[70] Valentino 2004, 10-13.

[71] Bellamy 2011, 2.

[72] Ulfelder and Valentino 2008, 2; Anderton 2016.

[73] Amongst other problems, numerical thresholds should ideally scale with relevant population size.

[74] See: Straus 2015, 22-24. Like most scholars, I assume that such violence differs from large quantities of uncoordinated and privately motivated abuses, see: Humphreys and Weinstein 2006, 433 & 445. See also, however: Barnes 2017. I use the term 'massacres' to refer to smaller-scale killings of ten or more civilians within the space of 24 hours, whether as part of a campaign of mass killings or not.

conclusions, exaggerating the centrality of such distinctive features and obscuring crucial links to non-genocidal forms of violence.[75]

Mass killings include a range of phenomena – genocide, total war, state repression, ethnic cleansing, and the deadliest campaigns of terrorism and civilian victimization in civil wars – which are distinct, and unlikely to be fully explained by a single overarching theory. My contention, though, is that the key questions scholars ask about *ideology* are broadly consistent across those phenomena. My focus is squarely on such questions, not the full gamut of all relevant causes of mass killing.[76] Chapter 3 and the Conclusion clarify how my account interacts with other explanations of mass killing – in particular those focused on the origins, incentives and dynamics of various kinds of political crisis.

The cases I study in this book all involve mass killings perpetrated by *states* – domestically and internationally recognised governments and their agencies – albeit often with significant collaboration by non-state actors. While my argument is not limited to state violence, this focus contrasts with much recent research centred on rebel insurgencies, civil war factions (whether rebel or government), or terrorist organizations. That recent trend is understandable since insurgencies and terrorist organizations have become increasingly prevalent in global conflict. But there is still a compelling reason to focus on states: they are, by far, the worst perpetrators of violence against civilians.[77] In focusing on *mass* killings, I also exclude lower-level forms of 'one-sided violence.'[78] This is consequential for theory-building. Lower-level violence against civilians requires fewer perpetrators, carries lower political costs and risks, and might suggest greater efforts at discrimination. Theories which side-line ideology may therefore look more plausible here. Nevertheless, all forms of political violence have a relevant ideological dimension.[79] Hopefully, readers primarily interested in other forms will still find this book relevant.

Of course, whether you think ideology matters depends on what you mean by 'ideology'. This is a problem, because few words have been so varyingly defined by scholars.[80] As already suggested, my conception of ideology is a broad one: ideologies are distinctive political worldviews, and therefore ubiquitous and ordinary features of political life. Individuals, groups and organizations generally require ideologies, both to make sense of their political worlds and to mobilise, coordinate and sustain collective action. In this

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[75] Powell 2011, 90-5; Verdeja 2012, 311-12; Straus 2012; King 2012, 324-5 & 330-1. Exclusively focusing on genocide can also have problematic *political* consequences, see: Straus 2019; Moses 2021.
[76] In this sense I seek to provide a "focused theory" that specifically explicates ideology's role in such violence, see: George and Bennett 2005, 67 & 70.
[77] Davenport 2007, 1 & 12
[78] Eck and Hultman 2007, 235
[79] On ideological dimensions of terrorism, see, for example: Drake 1998; Stepanova 2008; Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Chenoweth and Moore 2018, ch.5; Holbrook and Horgan 2019; Ackerman and Burnham 2019. On the ideological dynamics of armed groups, see, for example: Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Bosi and Della Porta 2012; Costalli and Ruggeri 2017; Schubiger and Zelina 2017; Parkinson 2021; Lefèvre 2021.
[80] McLellan 1995, 1; Gerring 1997

usage, to say that violence is 'ideological' is not to necessarily impute especially dogmatic or idealistic motives or justifications to it. It is instead to emphasize that the motives and justifications, *whatever they are*, are vitally embedded in broader distinctive sets of ideas about politics, without which the violence cannot be properly understood or causally explained. This sort of broad conception of ideology is increasingly popular, but some readers may be more familiar with a narrower conception, where ideologies denote tightly consistent belief-systems that provide detailed visions of ideal social order. I explain my rejection of this narrower conception in Chapter 2. But in brief, it is inconsistent with what we now know about those familiar real-world phenomena – like conservatism, environmentalism, neoliberalism or feminism – that almost everyone agrees are ideologies. These rarely take the form of tightly consistent belief-systems providing detailed blueprints for society, but are looser sets of ideas, values and narratives, that nevertheless constitute profoundly distinct orientations to politics and society, and often generate distinct political norms and institutions.

This point is about more than mere semantics: it is part of my plea for comparative scholars of political violence to adopt a more sophisticated view of what ideologies are and how they shape politics – one closer to that of many historians, ethnographers, political theorists and scholars of social movements.[81] Notably, almost identical arguments have also been made in both terrorism studies and research on civil wars, where scholars similarly warn that a preconception of ideology as a rigidly consistent and idealistic belief-system obscures more than it reveals.[82] This argument also highlights the tight interrelationship between ideology and many other important focal points of 'ideational' research on political violence, such as propaganda,[83] discourse/speech,[84] norms,[85] identity[86] and organizational culture.[87] Ideology does not offer some sort of competing 'alternative' to these concepts in explaining mass killing, but operates through and alongside them. All these concepts are therefore tied together in my analysis of mass killing.

Ideology, Perpetrator Coalitions and Political Crisis

Mass killings are complex campaigns of collective action that cannot be reduced to one set of characters.[88] They are generally initiated by *political elites*, implemented by various kinds of *rank-and-file subordinates*, and tacitly or actively supported by *broader segments of the societies*

[81] For leading examples of such scholarship, see: Skinner 1965; Skinner 1974; Snow and Benford 1988; Boudon 1989; Eagleton 1991; Freeden 1996; Wedeen 1999; Snow 2004; Priestland 2007; Wedeen 2019.
[82] Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Holbrook and Horgan 2019
[83] McKinney 2002; O'Shaughnessy 2004; Timmermann 2005; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014; Stanley 2015
[84] Jabri 1996; Scutari 2009; Waldron 2012; Benesch 2012; Benesch 2012; Benesch 2014
[85] Fujii 2004; Morrow 2015; Morrow 2020
[86] Fearon and Laitin 2000; Suny 2004; Gartzke and Gleditsch 2006; Volkan 2006
[87] Johnston 1995; Katzenstein 1996; Hull 2003; Long 2016
[88] See: Harff 2003; Owens, Su, and Snow 2013; Williams 2021.

or communities in which mass killing occurs.[89] Individuals in all three of these groups, moreover, are guided by a diverse range of motives and considerations, not a single shared 'perpetrator mindset.' As Thomas Kühne writes of the Holocaust and Stalin's Great Terror:

> "Not all… embraced mass murder unanimously. Carrying out mass murder meant integrating different individuals and social entities, varying degrees of willingness to participate, different perpetrators, collaborators and accomplices, sadists, fanatics, cold-blooded killers, occasional doubters, more serious dissenters, and unwilling yet submissive collaborators."[90]

Mass killings are best understood, in other words, as a product of what Kjell Anderson terms "perpetrator coalitions."[91] Explaining mass killing is consequently not a matter of identifying "the reason" for civilians being killed, but of identifying why such internally diverse perpetrator coalitions come into being, and how they are held together and organised so as to carry out systematic violence against civilians.

Here, I share the view of most contemporary scholars that perpetrator coalitions generally emerge in response to certain kinds of political crisis. But crises will not produce mass killing in the absence of some kind of hardline ideology. This is because of two key properties of mass killing: first, their highly destructive, uncertain and risky consequences (what I refer to as their *strategic indeterminacy*), and second, their exceptionally brutal and troubling moral character (what I call their *normative extremity*). Since mass killings are strategically indeterminate and normatively extreme, it is never obvious that regimes or groups will resort to them, even in dire emergencies. For sure, crises may open the opportunity for mass killing, and could make it look potentially useful. We can often, as such, tell a plausible story as to why perpetrators might 'rationally' target civilians in such a crisis. But there is almost always *at least as plausible a story* as to why perpetrators should have rationally avoided such violence. It is the particular way crises are ideologically interpreted and mobilized by hardliners – to generate a justificatory narrative for mass killing – that is crucial.[92]

I therefore show that hardline ideologies and justificatory narratives are not mere 'symptoms' of certain 'deeper causes' of mass killing, easily generated and manipulated to rationalize whatever course of action political elites prefer. Nor, however, do ideologies

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[89] Mann 2005, 8-9
[90] Kühne 2012, 141
[91] Anderson 2017, 99-101
[92] See also: Mann 2005, 7-8. I therefore present ideology in a way consistent with 'INUS' or 'NESS' causation: mass killings may occur via multiple different sets of causal factors, with ideological justifications of the violence a necessary but insufficient component of each of those causal sets. See: Mackie 1965; Wright 2013.

generally provide longstanding pre-formed plans for extermination for which political crises are no more than a pretext. Instead, ideologies radicalize (or deradicalize) over time according to *both* broader material and social conditions and the existing character of an ideology itself. Extremist ideologies often, for example, flourish in times of economic depression or social conflict, and the onset of violence itself typically radicalizes social norms and intergroup attitudes. But the existing strength of sympathy for or opposition to hardline ideas is also a critical catalyst for or constraint on radicalization. Frequently, indeed, ideologies shape the onsets of crisis just as much as crises shape prevailing ideologies. In my account of mass killing, this escalatory interaction between crisis and ideology therefore takes centre stage. Ideologies matter because they determine whether a justificatory narrative for mass killing, capable of binding together and sustaining a perpetrator coalition, emerges in serious strength in times of crisis.

Within perpetrator coalitions, both 'elites' – the political leaders and high-ranking officials who generally initiate and organize mass killing – and 'masses' – the rank-and-file subordinates and broader communities who implement or support the violence, matter. This book is about both. I argue that ideologies, by motivating and legitimating decisions by individuals across these groups, are crucial to the creation, maintenance and activities of the perpetrator coalitions needed for mass killing to occur. But there are debates in contemporary scholarship between comparatively 'top-down' or *elitist* theories of mass killing, which focus on decisions by senior political decision-makers,[93] and more 'bottom-up' or *societal* theories, which emphasize either strong public support for mass killing,[94] or diffuse patterns of local violence which become interconnected into joint campaigns.[95]

In truth, mass killings vary in this respect,[96] but I generally lean towards elitist accounts.[97] More purely bottom-up forms of violence against civilians, such as lynchings or ethnic riots, are possible. But they rarely escalate to mass killing without elite organization.[98] Even when there is public pressure for discriminatory policies against certain groups, elites generally possess significant latitude in deciding how to satisfy such popular pressures, and capacities to dampen, mobilize or funnel them using state authority and propaganda.[99] Consequently, many mass killings occur despite little initial public pressure, but few cases appear to involve highly reluctant leaders pushed into mass killings

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[93] Valentino 2004; Straus 2015; Bulutgil 2017; Maat 2020

[94] Goldhagen 1996; Su 2011. Goldhagen places somewhat more emphasis on elite leadership in Goldhagen 2010. Su's landmark study of China's Cultural Revolution strongly stresses the role of 'willing communities', but also emphasises how "the perpetrators invariably were organised by local authorities" (Su 2011, 65) so his account mixes elitist and societal elements.

[95] Gerlach 2010; Karstedt 2012

[96] Anderson thus distinguishes, for example, between "specialised" and "participatory" genocides, see: Anderson 2017, 46.

[97] For similar perspectives, see: Valentino 2004; Straus 2015; McLoughlin 2020

[98] Even in these forms of violence, however, elites tend to play critical roles. See, for example: Brass 2005; Dumitru and Johnson 2011, 9-11.

[99] Valentino 2004, ch.2; Gagnon 2004. See also: Zaller 1992.

by a clamouring public. I therefore place primary emphasis on ideology's role in shaping elite perceptions and decision-making.

Yet there are dangers in overly elitist accounts.[100] Waller contends, for example, that "political, social or religious groups wanting to commit mass murder do. Though there may be other obstacles, they are never hindered by a lack of willing executioners."[101] This is somewhat misleading. While states are always able to mobilize *some* willing executioners, how effectively and extensively they can do so varies. Security or military forces may refuse to enact violence against civilians, or even turn against elites: as in Iran in 1979, or Egypt in 2011.[102] When mass killing is perpetrated, moreover, bottom-up escalatory dynamics often shape violence independent of elite intentions,[103] and in a few cases, elites largely just authorize or tolerate mass killing, with enthusiastic rank-and-file groups – such as the mercenary gangs who massacred indigenous populations in 19th Century California – taking centre stage.[104] Even in more centralised mass killings, elites can rarely *coercively micromanage* rank-and-file perpetrators or broader mass publics, so non-elite individuals retain significant agency.[105] Consequently, hardline justificatory narratives are important, not just in shaping elite decision-making, but also in mobilizing and organizing rank-and-file perpetrators of the violence, and in sustaining vital support and legitimacy for mass killing amongst broader publics.[106]

In emphasizing that these key hardline justificatory narratives revolve around familiar but radicalised strategic and moral ideas about security politics, I am revising rather than entirely rejecting traditional-ideological perspectives. Most traditional-ideological perspectives also emphasize the framing of victims as threatening, guilty and 'other.' Ideological conceptions of security politics are always linked, moreover, to broader political goals and visions in some way, because *what one seeks to secure* in security politics depends on one's account of the political community and its ultimate purposes. Nevertheless, I contend that traditional-ideological perspectives have wrongly emphasised the radicality of perpetrators' ultimate goals, when what really matters is the radicality of how perpetrators understand the pursuit of that most conventional political goal: the securing of a given political order.

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[100] See also: Mann 2005, 8-9.
[101] Waller 2007, 15
[102] Weiss 2014, 2-3
[103] Gerlach 2010; Karstedt, Brehm, and Frizzell 2021, 10.6-10.8.
[104] Madley 2004
[105] Aerial bombing campaigns are something of an exception, as discussed in Chapter 6.
[106] In many cases, the ideological orientation of *external actors* may also matter. The US heavily facilitated mass killing in Guatemala and Indonesia for example, as did the French in the Rwandan Genocide, due in part to ideology, see: Wallis 2006/2014; Grandin 2011; Robinson 2018. But this is not consistently significant across mass killings. External actors generally matter more when perpetrators depend on external patron-client support relationships, are vulnerable to intervention, or when international norms prohibiting mass killing are relatively strong. See also: Welsh 2010; Bellamy 2012; Dill 2014; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Stanton 2016.

I argue, indeed, that existing scholarship often overfocuses on the more 'emotional' aspects of ideologies: utopian dreams, dogmatic absolutism, intense hatreds, and so on. Emotional dynamics are certainly important. But this book places equal emphasis on ideologies' 'epistemic' aspects: the way they shape purportedly factual *narratives about the world*.[107] Such ideological narratives are politically crucial in complex societies, because our ability to ground our political beliefs in direct experience is highly constrained. Given limited time and expertise, we rely on both our ideological preconceptions, and the claims of prominent ideological producers such as state authorities, political parties, and the media. This is especially true in security politics, where most citizens can make little use of their personal experiences to assess the truth or falsity of claims about 'national security.' But more broadly, conservatives, liberals, communists and fascists are divided, not simply by different aims and values, but by contrasting narratives about their political worlds. In this sense ideologies provide *imagined realities:* visions of politics rooted in existing beliefs, indirect testimony and story-telling more than direct experience or hard evidence.[108] In this respect, my analysis dovetails with the recent growth of research on 'fake news', conspiracy theories and political misinformation.[109] Since false beliefs are pervasive, persistent and powerful even in the freest and most prosperous societies, it is hardly surprizing that they can prove crucial in the crisis-ridden contexts of mass killing.

Such ideological narratives remain, of course, emotionally and morally charged. This is crucial, since the psychological sciences have now generated a wide degree of consensus that emotions are *essential* foundations for collective political action,[110] including violence.[111] But our emotions and moral judgements are deeply intertwined with our narratives about reality – as Jennifer Hochschild puts it: "Where you stand depends on what you see."[112] Moreover, since people's underlying values change slowly, yet their perceptions of the world can change quickly, rapid ideological radicalization towards violence is more likely to be a product of changing narratives than a wholesale moral reorientation. Those who think mass killings are justified and those who think them unconscionable are divided, I argue, as much by fundamentally different imagined realities as by contrasting values.[113] "When viewed from divergent perspectives," eminent psychologist Albert Bandura reminds us, "the same violent acts are different things to different people."[114]

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[107] See also: Holbrook and Horgan 2019. For broader work on political narratives, see: Patterson and Monroe 1998; Hammack 2008; Haidt, Graham, and Joseph 2009; Krebs 2015.
[108] I intentionally allude to: Anderson 1983/2006, 6.
[109] It also aligns with those who associate ideology with the employment of power/knowledge - see, variously: Simonds 1989; Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000; Fricker 2009.
[110] McDermott 2004; Mercer 2010; McDoom 2012; Ross 2014; Hall and Ross 2015
[111] Chirot and McCauley 2006; Dutton 2007; Collins 2008; Grossman 2009; Klusemann 2010; Costalli and Ruggeri 2017
[112] Hochschild 2001. See also: Zaller 1992, 24.
[113] See also: Crelinsten 2003.
[114] Bandura 1999, 195.

Take, for example, recent mass violence against the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar's Rakhine region, which peaked in large-scale expulsions and numerous killings in 2017.[115] Outside of Myanmar, this was widely condemned as the indiscriminate ethnic cleansing of an unarmed civilian population long victimised by Myanmar's government. But supporters of the violence from within Myanmar – including Buddhist religious leaders – operate inside an entirely different ideological narrative of reality.[116] The Rohingya – whom are typically referred to simply as 'Muslims' or 'Bengalis' – "stole our land, our food and our water," stated one Buddhist abbot; a member of Myanmar's Parliament asserted that "all the Bengalis learn in their religious schools is to brutally kill and attack;" while a local administrator of a 'Muslim-free' village explained that Muslims "are not welcome here because they are violent and they multiply like crazy."[117] A mother working for the *Patriotic Association of Myanmar* likewise argued that:

> "[Muslims] are swallowing our religion... Their religion is terrorism… They have been taught this since they were children, so it's very terrifying. We say, 'don't kill'…They say, 'kill, if you kill you will be blessed'…Now, in the news, we see about their Jihad in other countries, cutting off peoples' heads… I don't want to see our Buddhists suffer like that. That's why I want to show people the horror of their religion. I want everyone to know."[118]

Most individuals expressing such sentiments had little familiarity with actual Rohingya. But *the ideological portrayal of Rohingya*, rooted in years of rumour, story-telling and, increasingly, fake news on social media, drove support for their violent persecution and forced expulsion.[119] The aforementioned administrator acknowledged that he had never met a Muslim, but observed that "I have to thank Facebook because it is giving me the true information in Myanmar."[120] Another interviewee commented that: "According to [what I hear from] other people, I am worried that ISIS will affect us, and in our country we have many Muslims." Asked when she started feeling scared of Muslims, she answered: "It happened after seeing that news and the Rakhine problem. Since then the news always pops up about it."[121]

Again, some scholars tend towards the view that such ideological narratives are merely post-hoc rationalizations for self-interest, longstanding hatreds or underlying value

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[115] On this case in general, see: Lee 2021.
[116] Schissler, Walton, and Thi 2015, 10.
[117] Beech 2017.
[118] Schissler, Walton, and Thi 2015, 9-10.
[119] See also: Mozur 2018.
[120] Beech 2017
[121] Schissler, Walton, and Thi 2015, 12

orientations. But this interpretation is generally implausible. For most of the interviewees quoted above, little personal stake in the Rakhine region existed, and threatening perceptions of Muslims appeared to emerge only in *response* to propaganda and events.[122] In most cases of mass killing, indeed, evidence of longstanding hatreds or purely self-interested motives for violence is surprisingly scarce. The post-hoc rationalization interpretation fails to appreciate how deeply individuals rely on socially disseminated narratives to interpret the world around them – and how easily baseless claims about matters of fact can therefore come to look plausible within the right ideological context.

In focusing on ideologically radicalised security politics, I also oppose the tendency of many traditional-ideological perspectives to implicitly 'other' mass killing by presenting it as essentially a pathology of manifestly 'totalitarian', 'authoritarian' or 'evil' ideologies.[123] A broad range of regimes and groups, including liberal ones, have engaged in mass killing. The ideological detail of different cases varies in important ways – and a central argument of this book is that different mass killings take radically different forms due to the different ideological context in which they occur. Yet the most basic ideological processes through which mass killings are justified are largely consistent across cases. As Neil Mitchell observes: "Human beings are uninventive when it comes to reasons for atrocity."[124] This is *not* meant to suggest that all mass killings are fundamentally the same, nor to imply that they are morally equivalent. While my research has convinced me, for example, that the Allied area bombing of civilians in World War II was brutal, ineffective and unjustified, it was obviously not morally akin to the Holocaust. But there are a range of reasons for agreeing with Alex Bellamy's contention that "whilst the precise contours of justification shift from case to case, it is important to recognize the family resemblances between them."[125]

On Method

A detailed discussion of my methodological approach can be found in the Methodological Appendix at the end of the book, but a few points should be clarified from the outset. In the chapters that follow, I address a mixture of 'what?', 'why? and 'how?' questions,[126] and seek to make both broad generalizations about ideology's role across mass killings and context-specific claims about the ideological dynamics of individual cases.[127] My principal

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[122] See: ibid. 11, 15-17 & 21-22.
[123] Somewhat contra Kuper 1981, ch.5; Fein 1990, ch.4; Rummel 1994; Kressel 2002; Midlarsky 2011; Richter, Markus, and Tait 2018. See also: Powell 2011, 95-7.
[124] Mitchell 2004, 53
[125] Bellamy 2012, 180
[126] In social scientific jargon, I am interested in both causal and constitutive, and explanatory and interpretive, forms of inquiry. But these are more closely connected than often assumed, see: Ylikoski 2013; Elster 2015, ch.3; Jackson 2016; Norman 2021. I reject the view that such forms of inquiry are ultimately incompatible, but see: Hollis and Smith 1990; Bevir and Blakely 2018.
[127] Tilly and Goodin 2006.

aim is to advance a causal argument. I claim that ideologies are crucial to explaining *why* mass killings occur, and I show *how* particular hardline ideas shape the initiation and implementation of violence. In contrast to some books in political science, I do not present my inquiry as a kind of 'experiment' for testing pre-formed hypotheses. Such an approach is not the only valid method of causal inquiry in social science and is often a rather inaccurate presentation of how research actually proceeds.[128] Much social science is more analogous to a detective unravelling a crime than a natural scientist working in a laboratory – in that it uses established foundational knowledge to interrogate available evidence concerning particular events and reach the most plausible causal conclusions. I embrace this approach: drawing on empirical research from across the humanities and social sciences to examine specific mass killings and make the best causal inferences about ideology's role.[129]

I provide a broad range of evidence for my arguments across the first, theoretical half of the book, but then delve in much more detail into the ideological dynamics of mass killing through my four historical case studies. The available evidence, I argue, counts against traditional-ideological, rationalist-sceptical and situationist-sceptical explanations of mass killing, and supports the neo-ideological synthesis I propose. Across cases of mass killing, key ideological justifications pre-date the violence, are closely linked to patterns of violence which cannot be explained if ideology is ignored, and involve ideas recognised in psychological science as capable of increasing support for violence. Even in the most obviously 'strategic' cases, such as the Allied Area Bombing of Germany and Japan or the Guatemalan Civil War, killing civilians in their hundreds and thousands was hugely disproportionate to the actual benefits, if any, that such violence yielded, and was not an obvious logical response to the pressures of war. In both these cases, mass killing *was* a strategy for military victory, but one that vitally depended on distinctive ideological understandings of warfare and crisis which significantly preceded the violence. Yet the primary ideological justifications for mass killings consistently revolve around conventional arguments about security, punishment, necessity, and valour. Even the most 'revolutionary' violence of the Stalinist terror was not part of a longstanding 'utopian' programme to transform society, but fundamentally an effort to secure the Soviet state in response to perceived threats and crisis.

My methodological approach does not generate some sort of knock-down 'proof' of ideology's impact in the way that one might prove the role of haemoglobin in blood or the relationship between a planet's mass and its gravitational pull. But such strong proofs are relatively rare in social science. My argument is that the available empirical evidence renders a neo-ideological perspective the *most plausible* characterization of ideology's role in

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[128] See: King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 7 fn.1; Yom 2015; Norman 2021.

[129] As discussed in the methodological appendix, this involves a form 'iterative induction' revolving around comparative-historical analysis see: Skocpol and Somers 1980; Mahoney and Terrie 2008; Mahoney 2015; Yom 2015.

mass killing. It is better supported than the sceptic's dismissal of ideology as playing a marginal role, or the traditional-ideological focus on deep ideological commitments to extraordinary goals or values.[130]

But this book is not solely concerned with causal claims. The very mindset of perpetrators of mass killing, and the meaning of the violence they implement, is mysterious. *How* could these people perpetrate? *What* were they thinking? *To what extent* did they support the violence? To demystify perpetrators, and make their violence intelligible, we must trace their narratives, assumptions and claims – identifying the reasons and sentiments through which they appear to have understood their own actions and showing how such ideas can gain currency in particular ideological contexts. For this purpose, I draw on interpretive techniques of intellectual history, discourse analysis, and political theory. Such inquiry also exposes the relative ease with which commonplace justifications of violence can be twisted to support horrific atrocities. This imparts an ethical dimension to my contribution, since this justificatory capacity carries implications for debates in political theory over the moral regulation of political violence and war. I return to these ethical implications in the book's Conclusion.

My entire argument depends on examining *ideas* – the building blocks of ideologies. Some scholars worry about this, objecting that we cannot rigorously study ideas because they operate in the human mind and are therefore not directly observable. As explained in my Methodological Appendix, this objection is misplaced. Problems of direct observation are common in science, and a matter of degree. Like many scholars, I believe that analysis of discourse, the use of psychological science, the examination of observable behaviour, and close attention to historical context, can collectively allow us to make inferences – albeit somewhat tentative ones – about the role ideas play in human action.[131] Moreover, we generally *have* to make such inferences.[132] Refusing to study ideas rarely results in scholars neutrally reserving judgement about their impact. Instead, scholars either implicitly treat ideas as unimportant, or make tacit assumptions about the ideas that guide human action without grounding such assumptions in evidence. Neither approach is justifiable. Instead, we should use actual empirical research to make the best inferences we can about the ideas and ideologies that appear to influence those we study.

1.4 Plan of the Book

The rest of the book is organised into two halves. The first develops my *retheorization* of ideology's role in mass killing. **Chapter 2 (Clarifying Ideology)** begins this task by

[130] See also: Lipton 2004; Douven 2011.
[131] Others worry that ideational explanation is 'tautological' – but this critique only holds when the evidence used to determine ideas is the very behaviour those ideas are then used to explain. Sophisticated ideational research avoids this error.
[132] See also: Mercer 2005.

defending a broad conceptualization of ideology and theorizing the multiple ways in which ideologies can influence political behaviour. **Chapter 3 (How Does Ideology Explain Mass Killing?)** presents the core argument of the book in more detail, showing why accounts that ignore ideology fail to explain mass killings, and detailing how 'hardline ideologies' generate and hold together perpetrating coalitions in times of political crisis. **Chapter 4 (The Hardline Justification of Mass Killing)** then delves deeper into the actual character of those hardline ideologies, the key justificatory narratives through which they promote mass killing in times of crisis, and the basis for thinking that such narratives have genuine 'causal power' to encourage violence.

The second half of the book then provides deeper *empirical* support for my account through my four case studies. I intentionally focus on four quite different cases of mass killing, that should prove collectively difficult for an ideology-centred account to coherently explain. **Chapter 5 examines Stalinist Repression**, which represents what might be thought of as a classic 'ideological' mass killing, although one that has received less attention in comparative research than more canonical cases like the Holocaust or Armenian Genocide. While this represents a relatively easy case for my argument that ideology is crucial, it is a tougher case for my claims that ideology's most important role in mass killing revolves around security politics rather than revolutionary goals. By contrast, I examine the next two cases, **Allied area bombing in World War II in Chapter 6** and **the Guatemalan Civil War in Chapter 7**, because they should be much harder cases for arguments asserting ideology's importance. Again, these are classic 'strategic' mass killings, of the kind that many scholars suggest can be explained without reference to ideology, but I show that ideology remained essential in both. **Chapter 8 examines the Rwandan Genocide,** which lies somewhere between the other cases. Most scholars recognize the strength of racist ideology in Rwanda, but several downplay the importance of that ideology in explaining why and how the genocide unfolded. I again show that ideology's role in Rwanda was nuanced, but crucial.

There are important limits to what I offer over these chapters. This book is not an exercise in new primary research on particular cases – involving fieldwork and new data collection – but an attempt to use the best existing scholarship on the cases I examine to advance debates over the role of ideology in mass killing. Since I am focused squarely on *ideology's role,* a range of further important dynamics necessarily get limited attention, although I try to highlight them where appropriate. Several issues – such as the role of ideology in cases where mass killing does *not* occur, or the deeper societal roots of hardline ideological radicalization – I do address, but will need to return to in future research to elaborate in full.[133] The book also sides with scholars who favour complex, context-

[133] I discuss 'negative cases' where mass killings do not occur in Chapters 3 and 4. Some readers may worry that without a dedicated case study of such a 'negative case,' I problematically 'select on the dependent variable,' but this complaint misunderstands the way I am making causal inferences in this

sensitive, historically detailed and interpretively rich theories of political violence, as opposed to those more focused on building relatively simple and general law-like predictive models.[134] Ultimately, different studies contribute to our ability to make sense of political violence in different ways. But a focused and comparative study aimed at advancing our understanding of ideology's role in mass killing is, I believe, overdue.

book, as explained in the Methodological Appendix. For four excellent comparative studies incorporating negative cases, see: Kaufman 2015; Straus 2015; Bulutgil 2017; Hiebert 2017.

[134] See: Pierson 2004; Tilly and Goodin 2006; Owens, Su, and Snow 2013; Kaufman 2015, 6-11; Williams and Pfeiffer 2017; Williams 2021.

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